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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO ART AND POLITICS

Edited by Randy Martin
(With editorial assistance from Victor J. Peterson, II)



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INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE REDUX

Critical Art Ensemble

Within contemporary cultural discourse, few argue with the statement that institutional critique (IC) is dead. It had its two decades of relevance in the 1970s and 1980s, and even bled a little into the 1990s. Artists such as Hans Haacke, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, Andrea Frasier, and Fred Wilson exposed every classist, sexist, and racist element of cultural institutions that were allegedly serving the public good through the collection, conservation, and display of cultural treasures. By the mid-1990s, perpetuating institutional critique was just beating a dead horse, as no more insights were to be gleaned, so politicized artists and arts administrators moved on to relational aesthetics, tactical media, culture jamming, and other interventionist methods and means that appeared so full of life. Institutional critique remained in its grave while the political economy of neoliberalism continued to evolve. Financial institutions, in particular, were about to embark on an accelerated evolution as they plundered new global markets in a near regulation-free environment. Neoliberalism was in hyperdrive, delivering on its promise to redistribute wealth to those who had the most at the expense of those who had the least, combined with core wealth extraction from the coffers of the public sector.

In spite of massive changes in the structure and dynamics of capitalism, IC remained in its grave until Occupy Wall Street. The foundation for the Occupy critique was clear: Wealth has been consistently redistributed in favor of the rich for decades; wages have remained flat or lowered for the grand majority of working people; and work demands have intensified over the same time period. Moreover, the economic system has bifurcated into two camps: those living in conditions of permanent economic depression and those who could not have it any better. This is why nothing gets better for the disorganized poor and working populations. For the wealthy, near interest-free money is ubiquitous, not to mention the additional millions being added to the coffers of financial institutions through quantitative easing. Unemployment is doggedly high, so people are desperate for any job, and willing to work more for less. If fear of unemployment was not enough, most people must also cope with the tyranny of debt that tacks them to desperation employment practices. Corporate profits are at an all-time high. The stock market is at record highs. Regulation of finance and labor practices is absent. And arguably most important, inflation is flatlined. What could possibly motivate the powerful to alter this situation? Certainly not the plight of nearly 50 percent of the US population suffering disastrous economic conditions, nor the staggering conditions of global poverty. Occupy Wall Street revived IC (via performativity) as one means to expose corruption—not in cultural institutions

this time, but the classist, racist, and sexist corruption in financial institutions that allowed this situation to occur and maintain itself. Concurrently, CAE believed it was time to take a fresh look at the institutions we at times found ourselves associated with. This appeared to be a difficult project, as no cultural platform has a cultural interest in a method believed dead. Then our opportunity came—an invitation to dOCUMENTA 13 (d13)—the perfect microcosm for an experiment in twenty-first-century IC.

Three Frames

Before we go further, CAE must acknowledge some key concepts that helped frame our analysis: proportion, globalization, and legitimation (crisis). We have already touched on proportion in the introduction. We do not mean this in the traditional Platonic sense of a harmonious alignment of the strata of being (as above, so below), but rather a conflicted tendency toward alignment more indicative of a Marxist understanding of material organization. Subordinate forms of production within a given historical moment will be pressured to reflect, however imperfectly, the dominant form of production. For example, during the time of industrial domination, agricultural production transformed into industrial farming. Even domestic space (particularly the kitchen) was Taylorized to better reflect the machinic characteristics of the factory. This is not to say that the analogy was perfect. Far from it; each domain continued to have its own sphere of autonomy, as well as limits on the degree to which the factory model could be imposed upon it. For example, a family had a difficult time replicating the authority structure of the factory. In spite of the model of the patriarch being the executive, the matriarch middle management, and the children the material to be machined into good parents, workers, and citizens, it was difficult for members to hire, fire, or quit; nor was there a clear separation of interests between the strata, as economies of desire and affect could not be rationalized away.

The art world follows this imperfect scheme as well. To the degree it can, the art world reflects characteristics of financial capital, particularly in terms of its relationship to globalization. It has, on the other hand, had problems with the characteristic of virtualization, since within the limits of art markets the virtual product is difficult to monetize, and there remains the threat of easy, cheap, and fast digital replication (a true problem for those in the music industry insistent on traditional property rights and law). With globalization, the elongated pyramid of art production has shifted in composition. At the top is biennial culture, comprised of a class of elite curators, artists, administrators, and investors that live a nomadic life, constantly moving to the ever-shifting location of the next blockbuster show. As there is no geographic financial center, there is no cultural center. Investment opportunities are global, as are recruiting sites in this intercultural (perhaps even internatural) market. The Americas, Europe, Asia, North and South Africa, the Middle East, and Australia are all in play.

Deeply interrelated and interdependent with this strata is the former top of the pyramid: the museums and blue chip galleries rooted in the former meccas of culture. For example, a museum may now host a blockbuster show, or be a partner in hosting one, but it cannot continuously maintain that scale of production, which is why this type of presentation had to become nomadic, seeking large pools of capital wherever they may be (in this respect the top strata has achieved virtualization). After such participation, a museum must rebuild and survive off its permanent collection, in conjunction with retrospectives and themed shows that are at best of mesoscopic significance. The next, interrelated, strata are the art schools, not-for-profits, and indy galleries that function as research and development, and as a network that reproduces the necessary work force. We are very familiar with these latter two strata, as IC has completed its work in these domains. Interrelated with this strata are the dangerous classes—the lumpen

kickstarter generation that is seeking a revolutionary independent alternative to the pyramid, but is still socialized by it, and often sucked back into it. These are the cultural producers who can no longer accept the legitimacy of the pyramid as a network of democratic institutions fostering the interests of the many and contributing to the public good.

Enter Habermas' notion of legitimation (crisis). The core of legitimation in neoliberal society rests in the maintenance of a public perception that capitalism and democracy are working in harmony together—that one reinforces the other—and what is created is a state of welfare for all. Unfortunately, the state works on behalf of capitalism first, and maintains programs of general and targeted welfare only to the extent it must to maintain its legitimacy as an arbiter of fair and just distribution of resources and wealth. Democracy and capitalism are at best frienemies—and at worst, in total opposition, as one tends toward distributed authority and the other toward centralized authority. In order to maintain the necessary perception of legitimacy, the state must offer programs that materially signify fair distribution. In the US, for example, there is food assistance, rent assistance, Obamacare, unemployment insurance, Social Security, etc. Unfortunately for those at the top of the extremely vertically elongated wealth pyramid, these are all public funds that could be in their pocket. The goal of capital is thus to gut these programs and privatize the money either through tax cuts, corporate welfare, or government contracts for goods and services that corporations can provide. These redistribution programs, in the capitalist utopian scenario, would be replaced by a commons of transcendental signifiers such as "freedom" and "self-reliance."

The art world also needs its programs and signifiers of legitimacy so that it can materially demonstrate that its top institutions and events are not solely in the service of an elite class. Consequently, we see a variety of education programs and community outreach programs that are supposed to demonstrate a commitment to the amelioration of the public sphere. From CAE's perspective, these programs are marginal to any institution that has them, but even more curious to us is how they continue. We will return to this question later in the essay, but will first address the schism in wealth through the lens of one of CAE's projects for d13.

A Public Misery Message

CAE first envisioned *A Public Misery Message: A Temporary Monument to Economic Inequality* in 1992, at the end of the Reagan/Thatcher era and the first wave of neoliberalism, when it had become clear that the great redistribution of wealth (all assets) in favor of the richest people was continuing at full intensity. Working somewhat against the grain at the height of identity politics in progressive discourse, we wanted to examine economic class relations in the US. Our original idea was to inscribe a skyscraper (appropriated or parasitic monumentality) with economic data that would allow viewers to visualize in concrete terms the vast economic separation of the wealthy from the grand majority of citizens. While the proportional wealth of the bottom 80 percent could be inscribed on the first floor, the building's rooftop observation deck could function as an inscription site for the top quintile, and would allow people to look down and visualize economic separation as an embodied, spatial separation. As time wore on and economic division grew wider, we came to realize that very few skyscrapers in the US were tall enough to serve as indices of class wealth. Eventually, we gave the idea to Hans Ulrich Obrist for his book *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects* (1998), which documented a variety of compelling but seemingly impossible proposals by artists, and shelved any hopes of actually doing the monument.

In spring 2011, during our interview for d13, we pitched this idea to the exhibition's artistic director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. We believed Carolyn would fully understand the

concept, would have one foot far enough out of the mainstream to appreciate it, and would have enough money to fund it. These predictions turned out to be true, and as that year turned into the year of austerity in Europe and brought the emergence of Occupy Wall Street in the US, the timing seemed right, and the project went forward. However, when we obtained the figures from the *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook*, we noticed the data had changed considerably since 1992. While we continued to divide the data by quintiles, we could not help but notice that the top 1 percent was now a class unto itself. We no longer needed the entire top quintile to make a statement about how far that grouping was separated in wealth from the lower 80 percent. In fact, much of the wealth of the top 19 percent had moved to the top 1 percent. Another sad, but not shocking, element is that the poorest quintile, mostly comprised of people living on approximately one dollar a day, had gone underwater. This seemed impossible, as this demographic has no credit, and thus theoretically cannot go into debt. Members of the bottom quintile traditionally plateau at economic absolute zero. However, due largely to Western student debt, the figure had gone into negative territory (–359 USD). This may not seem like much, until one realizes that the small subdemographic of students moved the ossified average of wealth for over a billion of the poorest people on earth.

In Kassel, no buildings were tall enough for the project, so we had to find a new means of spatially representing separation in regard to wealth. Only one thing came to mind that could produce the vertical line we wanted—a helicopter—and a powerful one at that, as small-engine helicopters are incapable of vertical take-offs. To quickly describe the set-up for this performance, the wealth of 99 percent of individuals in the global population could be proportionately represented within 15 meters, while the helicopter could lift people to the height of 225 meters (740 feet) that represented the wealth of individuals who make up the 1 percent. The 99 percent were represented by a banner that hung in the staging area we had set up near the entrance to the athletic field behind the Orangerie. The proportional wealth of the bottom 80 percent could be represented on the banner on a very human scale taking up just over a meter of its height. The remaining 13 meters was occupied by the top 19 percent, which was a massive enough separation, but nothing compared with the top 1 percent. While the view from the ground was stunning, the view looking down from the helicopter was far more vast and startling, in spite of the objective fact that the two directionalities were the same. By changing the perspective, proportionality and spatial familiarity were radically altered, and distance was understood in a more affective, embodied way. In this manner, we were convinced we could take the abstractions of large statistical numbers, and transform them into an embodied, visual, and spatial experience in the world that would aid in clarifying the content of the statistical abstractions.

The final problem to solve was deciding who could ride in the helicopter. For the solution, we decided to reflect the current social conditions in the same way we were reflecting the economic ones. In that spirit, we made limited-edition, printed invitations that guaranteed priority seating and sold for 200 euros to those who could afford them. The paper itself was partially made from paper currency. Everyone else could play a scratch-off lottery ticket with a one-in-fifty chance of winning (not bad odds for lotto). These tickets sold for one coin of any denomination from any currency. Ticket holders could proceed down a red carpet for priority seating, while lotto winners waited standby on a dirt path for their opportunity to get a view from the top.

Since the primary thrust of this project was to transform a nearly unfathomable statistical abstraction into a lived, concrete experience some may wonder, where is the IC in that? What CAE presented was more or less a concrete constellation representing a very unfortunate consequence of thirty years of neoliberalism. All true, but the IC was in the details. First, consider

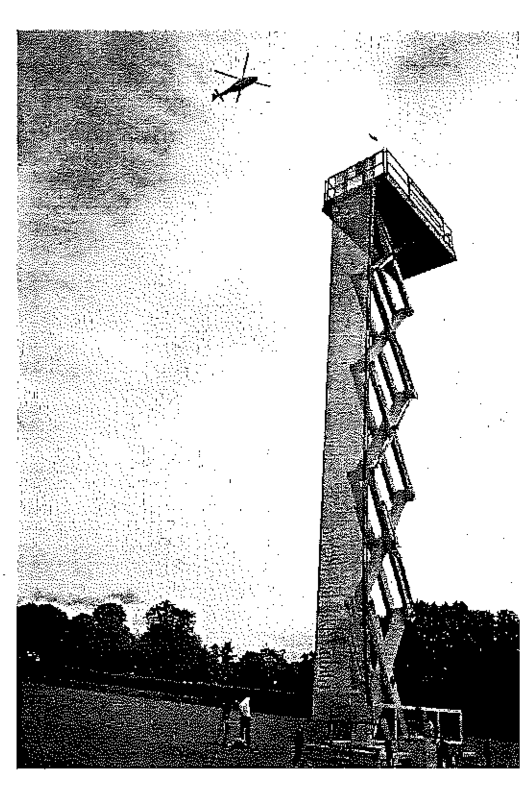


Figure 9.1 Public Misery Message: A Temporary Monument to Global Economic Inequality, Documenta 13, 2012.

our use of the helicopter as the operative instrument: It was also the perfect representation of the waste and excess that fundamentally constitutes biennial culture, and that is rarely commented upon or treated as wasteful, opulent, or decadent. CAE received harsh criticism regarding our use of the helicopter, but we did not read anywhere criticisms of the use of helicopters to place massive sculptures for display. The patrons of preview day were quite content to take the magical appearance of the outdoor monuments as just that. How little has changed since the 1970s. Nor was there ever a mention of all the fuel wasted and pollution generated in decamping the art world and sending it to middle-of-nowhere Germany for a destination art festival. The waste generated for this worldwide massing of art was dwarfed by the worldwide massing of people. CAE feels very confident in saying that the overwhelming majority did not ride a bike or use some other green transportation to get to Kassel. Events like these represent the transparent privilege of biennial culture; its geographic, nomadic movement is so unquestionably considered to be such a common part of everyday life that this form of waste and excess can simply be ignored, especially when green-oriented projects are included in the exhibition as an alibi for environmental democracy.

The invitations were a second and very telling, experience that we haven't been able to represent until now. In spite of the 200 euro cost, the majority of the tickets bought were not used. Although the vast majority of people with time and funds to visit Documenta would not likely see their wealth turned upside down by a sum of 200 euro, CAE would guess that that same overwhelming majority are not inclined to simply throw that money away. The true patrons of biennial culture, however, have no problem disposing of cash in this way. "Better to

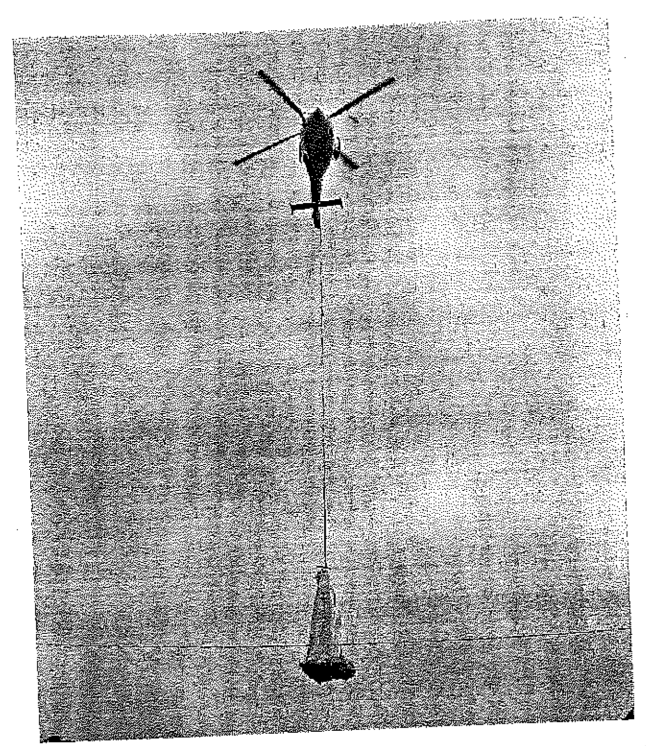


Figure 9.2 Prior to the opening of Documenta 13, a helicopter places a sculpture in the park.

have tickets and not use them than to need tickets and not have them" appears to have been the wisdom of these purchases. On the other hand, the lotto players were playing to win the "prize," and were sure to collect their winnings. The difference in the shaping of social relations pending access to wealth was clearly on display.

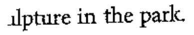
While presenting and watching the performance of economic difference was of great interest to CAE, we believed we would be remiss if we did not address the other end of the spectrum. We wanted to address the impoverished elements that always seem to ride on the coattails of elite production and function as its alibi for democratic structure. Now we can return to the question posed earlier: Why do people participate knowing this? This is a different question than that of politically motivated artists gambling that acting as temporary alibis for institutions or festivals may pay off, enabling them to obtain a platform to spread ideas and tactics that may raise consciousness or produce more effective action in regard to their issues of concern. This type of negotiation is fairly standard for anyone whose work does not reflect the values and tastes of biennial culture. What we wanted to examine was the institutionalization of education, public programming, and community outreach as a permanent, in-house alibi. How does this institutional mainstay perpetuate itself given its constant state of economic poverty?

One common explanation that we rejected at the outset is the notion that participants are somehow cashing in on the sign value of the venue. While there may be some value via this association, it's very little. If an artist or administrator is working outside of the main galleries of an elite institution, the sign value is completely degraded. People have not dined at a five-star restaurant just because they went in the back door and sampled a dish or two in the kitchen. Moreover, if we may stereotype for a moment, most of the people who participate in such programming are not doing what they do with a mind to becoming rich or famous; they are

trying to contribute to social change through the production and distribution of new forms of resistant culture. CAE's other d13 experiment gave us an opportunity to explore new hypotheses concerning this matter.

Winning Hearts and Minds (WHaM)

War zones are as instructive as they are destructive. Since Vietnam, they have beautifully illustrated the contradiction between capitalism and democracy. They teach the lesson that (false) democracy is an alibi for the good intentions of capitalist intervention even in the face of wanton destruction and appropriation. Whether it is the Thieu government in Vietnam or the Karzai government in Afghanistan, this lesson never changes. The establishment of global democracy has never been a goal of global capital. Its preference is for an authoritarian plutocracy that can be labeled a democracy. This is why the psy-ops principle of "winning hearts and minds" can simultaneously exist with the military strategy of "search and destroy." Now that winning hearts and minds is not just US policy, but NATO policy, we can see it at work in every conflict in which NATO members have a stake; in every case, the idea of winning the people through the alleged establishment of democratic institutions never has to be reconciled with unprovoked invasion, house-to-house searches, assassinations, torture, or drone attacks. Yet, even in these brutally conflicted environments, resistance is still possible, and positive new arrangements for living, activist networks, and even infrastructural changes can and have been built.



Cultural institutions in capitalist nations partially reflect this same disturbing set of contradictions and relationships. In the field of visual arts, museums tend toward a support of plutocracy through building and maintaining the value of collections and by functioning as a parallel track to the art market. Institutes, *Kunsthalles*, and major festivals function as corporate alibis for good cultural citizenship, and too often function within the frame of development of cultural products in the service of profit and enterprise. At the same time, these institutions have their democratic side, which usually appears in the form of community outreach, public programming, and education programs. These programs are generally the most impoverished, but are staffed by those who genuinely want to create events promoting social change, and are willing to accept poverty as a given condition to do it. This blend of having few resources, together with a strong sense of volunteerism, leads to the development of low-cost public events that are subsidized by the free labor of those who create them—elite institutions have found a way to leverage good citizenship. Or to put it another way, the poor subsidize the creation of a false signifier that signs the beneficence of plutocracy. And yet, on an immediate person-to-person level, the results of such performances, exhibitions, and events can be inspiring and culturally valuable.

This is the contradiction that CAE wanted to perform at d13 in *Winning Hearts and Minds*. As was to be expected, d13 had its education and community outreach programs that were not so well funded, but did better than most. Within this context and, more to the point, the general systemic one described above, CAE created a cultural space that was totally impoverished: a small space (3 \xD7 10 meters) with a minimum amount of furniture, no climate control, and located on the very margins of the festival at the end of the warehouse district near the railway station (a location we chose). We had zero budget for artist fees, travel, or installation support, although d13 provided free maintenance of the space itself. Two weeks before the festival started, we issued a call for proposals to use the space for one hour each day at noon; there would be one hundred lunchtime events over the one hundred days. Proposals poured in from around the world. Even though we told those who applied that there was no financial support and, even worse, that they would have to bring all their own equipment, the program filled in a matter of weeks (the amount of proposals became so unwieldy that we had to pull the call a week after the festival opened).

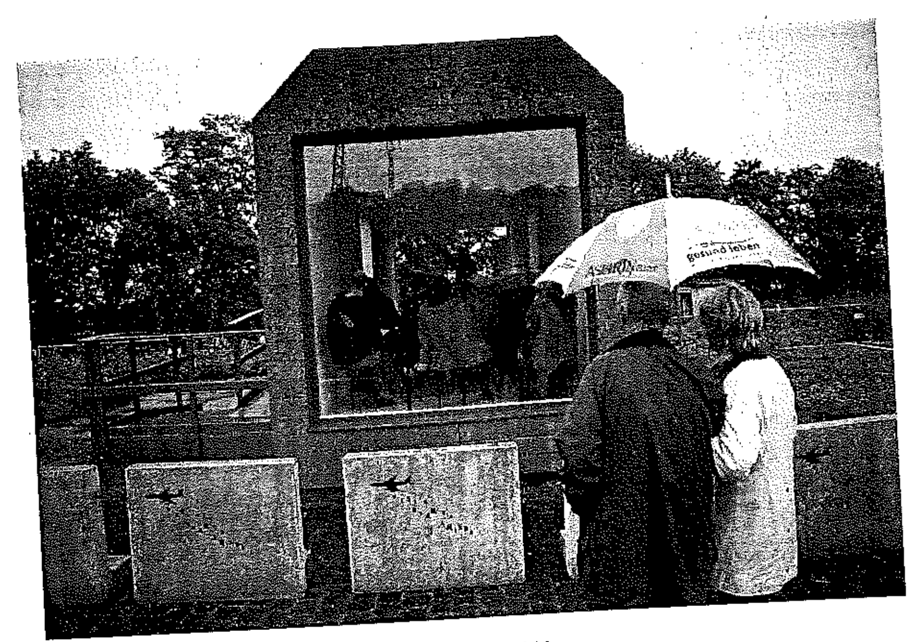


Figure 9.3 Winning Hearts and Minds, Documenta 13, 2012.

Most of the events we chose were not curatorially viable (which is not to say we didn't think they were good projects). As usual, the poor and the marginal were subsidizing the wealthy with free programming. At the same time, we lived the other half of the contradiction. We wanted these projects to succeed. We wanted to give these artists a real platform at d13, and so we did whatever we could within our frame of poverty to help make these events the best they could be.

This relational experiment left CAE in the unusual position of being participant observers at every level. We were performers, administrators, directors, and audience members. We had inside, participant knowledge of all the different interactions, from preparation to execution to post-event reflection. We could begin to entertain the question of why people participate in this activity from a point of direct experience.

This has been a curiosity to CAE for a long time. On a fairly regular basis, we get invitations from the "alternative" wing of prestigious institutions to do a performance, give a lecture, or speak on a panel. It's usually for a good cause, or an important topic that deserves exploration, but there is never a budget that would allow us to participate without paying into the event ourselves—labor subsidizing the conditions of it own employment under the premise that this is a way to contribute to social change. As we stated earlier, this is the leveraging of good cultural citizenship in a bait-and-switch scheme. CAE generally does not accept these invitations (although there have been exceptions), but in no way are these declinations a problem for these institutions, as they can always recruit other participants as instantly as we could fill our space at d13.

CAE does not mean to suggest that most artists are fooled by the scheme; they are not, and our experiences and data from d13 seem to back it up. Rather, subjectivity is divided. On the one hand, there is a mode of critical reflection in which the conditions of production are obviously exploitive. No participant in CAE's project could fail to comprehend that its conditions were absurd given its context in one of the wealthiest art world events on the planet, any more than recipients of invitations to work at any other institution at cost to themselves perceive them as sustainable or fair.



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On the other hand, there is the mode of immediate experience. The existential territory that can be carved out in which new or radical or unusual conversations, behaviors, and activities can be mobilized is motivating, because it can produce copious amounts of pleasure, satisfaction, and empowerment. This overflow of affect seems to override reason, pushing producers on to new events. While CAE received endless questions as to why there was no financial support for the project, and as many requests for free passes to the festival or some other kind of secondary compensation (which was never given), indicating a frustration with the conditions of participation, we only had one complaint following a contributing artist's event. The other ninety-nine were completely enthusiastic about their presentations. Moreover, the amount of appreciation we received for sharing our little shed in the railyards was surprising even to CAE. This outpouring of good will toward WHaM by the participants answered our question in terms of what drives participation in this unfortunate cultural landscape. People are more interested in a less-alienated cultural connection than in their bank account. Once enveloped in the reward of the productive moment, putting reason aside for a moment was easy. From our point of view as administrators, CAE can say that it was the same for us. We could easily lose our observational distance once caught up in a successful event, and be happy about the project for immediate, rather than secondary, reasons (such as understanding gained at the end of the project cycle).

While CAE has hopefully contributed to skepticism about the received hypothesis that explains participation in impoverished conditions as mere appropriations of sign value, we find ourselves back at an old problem that has concerned CAE since its inception: How can we reintegrate critical reflection and application with pleasure economies in emerging existential territories of alternative sociability? Our stock answer is always to make sure when engaging a public that we have a mechanism in the project that enables people to see their stake in what is being talked about or performed. We believe we have to qualitatively and personally connect them to the issue. If we fail to do that, they're not going to care, or will perceive it as boring didactic rubbish. With this method, affect is a desirable and productive consequence, reinforcing the dialogical critique of codes, and the planning and execution of new forms of organization. Be that as it may, this suggestion does not solve the problem of negotiation with sponsoring institutions to begin with, when the precondition for action is self-financing. This is a problem for which we have no answer at present.

CAE is loathe to suggest a boycott, because it would not produce a different set of relations. To the contrary, such action would only provide cultural institutions cover, signing that they would be more democratic if only the desire existed among the general population. This would actually create the desired conditions that these institutions want, reinforced with plausible deniability.

Cultural producers have to stay at the negotiation table, not only to gain access to platforms for ourselves (although it is often more productive to make our own), but to aid in pushing elite institutions away from their allegiance to capital and toward an allegiance with democracy. Such institutions cannot leave the table, either, as their legitimation rests upon "good faith" participation; however, those below or outside the second tier of the pyramid have no leverage to move beyond the social and economic minimum. This was abundantly clear to CAE in our interactions as administrators with those in our program. The "take it or leave it" construction appears to be immovable, and this may be a primary reason for a needed resurgence of IC. We can now see the work of women, people of color, and a variety of sexual orientations in museums and galleries. We can also see both public, and some private, cultural institutions forced to have some relationship to work beyond that dictated by the market and tastes of patrons. IC has contributed to these changes and perhaps, through its symbolic pressure, general financial and social relationships may be improved as well.